ANDROID™ NETRUNNER™
THE CARD GAME

The Spaces Between

The highway was oscillating between a deep maroon and a neon orange. It made his head spin, but he kept the tracker in his view. Someone less experienced might have missed the subtle shift as it disappeared down a tunnel, but not Nasir. He followed it in.

The tunnel was a c-tube, created for high-speed data transfers when the primary data was light-based. The tracker picked up speed, and Nasir boosted his grip to match, latching onto the tunnel edge to keep himself level. "Energy low." The report from Edna reverberated through his digital being. He needed to capture the tracker, now. He increased his output, and let go of the tunnel edge.

"Entering Terra Incognita." The tunnel split. It happened so fast he didn't even have time to throw down an anchor. The tube shifted from a ringed pattern to a deeper black, and then ceased entirely. He felt the space around him fold in on itself, and grabbed vainly for an edge. There was nothing there.

"Energy low."

He pulled up his map and sent out pings, looked for a pointer. Any sort of sign. There was nothing but the dark energy of cyberspace. Nasir activated his diving suit. It was the safest way to explore the nether realms. There was data here, he could feel it flowing around him like a draft of air. Faint, but there. It was headed down. It was always headed down. Even though direction was meaningless within the construct, it was useful for his sense of balance.

"Energy low." He ignored the warning for the third time. He should have more than enough to last for another several minutes. The data flow increased, and he followed it. There was something up ahead. It was big, dense. He felt its gravitational pull, and let it guide him toward it.

"Mu waves spiking!" Edna sounded concerned. She maybe should be; his brain was interfaced directly with his rig, and mu waves could be translated directly into his brain with unpredictable results. There was a rush and his e-visuals flared to life. There was a bright light, outside of the visible spectrum, that gave off a pulsating glow. "Mu levels dangerous!" Nasir pushed power to his net shield to keep his grip under control. The mu readings were the highest he had ever seen; alpha and delta waves, too. But there was something else. Something beyond the wave field. He snapped it, reeled in a piece. Then it hit him.

He moved, but nothing happened. He was frozen. His suit was jello. Then it was…happening. All at once. He was spinning. Backwards. He tried to move forward, and he felt his datastream fragmenting. His grip was loosening. Lag.

"1.2 second lag detected."

He jacked out, felt the datastream slip away like sand through his fingers. The room spun into view around him. His workshop, with its peeling paint and scattered cords. He felt the thumping of his heart and the rush of blood. He closed his eyes, and breathed deeply.

There was something important there, in the void. He ripped out the spikes from his hands, and swiveled his chair to an upright position. His console was buzzing away on the table in front of him, and he loaded up the piece he had grabbed. "Edna, run a primary analysis." It took over fifteen seconds to get the results.

"Primary analysis complete." Nasir tapped away. He had to be sure. Every test he threw at his small packet of information made him more excited.

The presence he had not quite accessed, it was binary. Elemental. Powerful. Unmatched in its purity. It must be a source. Eden. Hades. Utopia. The nodes that built the net. The oldest protocols. Thought to be a myth, a legend for the rationalists. g00ru had posited that if they did exist, their streams would be so fragmented that it would be almost impossible to detect. That they would degrade over time. But Nasir thought differently. What if they didn't degrade? What if they evolved? His graduate project at EIT had posited this, and Nasir had devoted countless days scouring the reaches of the net, waiting for the day he would stumble upon the source.

But the lag. It was 1.2 seconds. That could mean only one thing. He was accessing a node outside of the earth's atmosphere. He started a mapping protocol.

"Bug detected!" Nasir instinctively loaded up his destroyer countermeasures. Edna had powerful defenses, but sometimes something slipped through. He traced the bug. It was an observer, and had residual brain-wave readings–his brain waves. He must have picked it up on impact with the field. It was impossible to tell what sort of information it might have been transmitting, if any.

"Edna, disconnect from the net, 45 minutes. Execute a complete system wipe of drive 3." It was better not to take any chances. He would also update his link system. If there was one thing he didn't want, it was someone showing up at his door. Having the bug go undetected for over ten minutes was troubling. He wondered if there was anything else he might be missing.

"Probable locations charted." The mapping protocol was complete. He glanced at the results. The lag was consistent with a location in outer space. Somewhere on the moon, to be exact. There would be no way to reduce it remotely. And with that amount of lag, it would be too dangerous to access the field. Strange. If it was a source, why would it be on the moon? The moon was colonized long after the original net framework. It didn't add up. But he would make it. He was a believer.

He pulled up his cred account. It was running low. Heading upstalk was not cheap. And there was always the matter of transporting sensitive material back down. But perhaps there was a way. He still had a bottle of Martian dreamwine, from the last job, after all. And where he was going, he wasn't likely to need it. His dreams were within reach, he could feel them like the current of the datastream, pulsing through his veins.

— To be continued in the *First Contact* Data Pack…

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